RollingStone

HOT REPORTER ABC News media analyst Jeff Greenfield explains it all for you

Photograph by Chris Callis

BY JONATHAN ALTER

JEFF GREENFIELD, 45, is a political and media analyst at ABC News, where his brainy but accessible approach has made him especially popular among political junkies. After graduating from the University of Wisconsin and Yale Law School, he decided that the Vietnam War must end and ıat law firms were boring. So he joined ıe 1968 presidential campaign of Robert . Kennedy as a speechwriter. He then ·orked for several years as a political onsultant to Democratic candidates, arning politics from the inside. In his idthirties, Greenfield entered journalism s a part-time media critic for CBS Jews, later moving to ABC, where he egularly appears on *Nightline*.

Last summer Greenfield became more idely known as an analyst at the political onventions, and in the fall, each Monday vening, he anchored a special *Nightline* evoted to politics. He is the author of *elevision: The First Fifty Years* and *The eal Campaign*, writes a syndicated newsaper column and is at work on a political ovel. The father of two, he lives in New York City. ireenfield was interviewed in his apartment on the Upr West Side and on the Pan Am shuttle to Washingn, which is almost his natural habitat. Passengers awked at him as if he were Joan Collins visiting Spago.

o you think there's a higher level of political analysis on televin than there used to be?

I think there have been plenty of terrific analysts in ıe past. Mine's not a higher analysis, just different in terms of the language used and the frame of reference. I think it's generational. I'm forty-five, but I don't seem forty-five. I come out of a postwar sensibility. I'm part of the first generation that liked rock & roll music. I write folk lyrics sometimes. I am much more willing to use political artifacts to make a political point. You would be surprised if Cronkite or Chancellor or Moyers were to end the primary season by saying, "What a long strange trip it's been." I am very comfortable doing that, because it's what I grew up with. People just a little older didn't. I mean, Koppel is only three years older than I am. But that is when rock hit first.

You have a historical sensibility. Not many people can pull something out of their heads about, say, the Bull Moose party.

Well, I got interested in politics when I was nine [1952]. My mother was a political junkie. She was listening to the conventions on the radio – two of the most exciting conventions there ever were. And I got intrigued. I've spent three and a half decades reading about politics, not because it was my job, but because I loved it. And don't

forget that there's an advantage in this medium to being glib – to having fairly quick recall. If you're on the floor [of a convention] and somebody throws you on the air, it helps if you say, "This reminds me of what happened to Hubert Humphrey in 1948 at the Democratic convention."

You seem to believe TV is improving, reaching less for the lowest common denominator. What happened?

Several things changed. First, television used to be a medium in which its own practitioners, with a couple of exceptions like [Edward R.] Murrow, weren't all that sure what they were doing. They were frightened of their own power, of government regulation, of offending people. It was a medium they hadn't grown up with. Now you've got two generations that have grown up with TV. So people are more willing to play. I think the level of writing for prime time is much higher than it's ever been. The better sitcoms and dramas are trying all kinds of new things. Characters are more real. Part of the reason is that television is forty or fifty years old. Another reason is that the increased competition means you have to appeal to a less mass audience and can take more risks.

> The attitude of campaign managers is "Well, so we make a mistake – 50,000 will see it corrected in the 'Times,' but millions heard the original charge on TV."

Is it possible to greatly expand the number of people interested in politics, or will there always be a relatively small number interested in what you cover?

One of the reasons why people used to be more interested in politics is that for a long time it was one of the few public entertainments around. Going back 150 years, the Fourth of July became a big celebration in this country because the competing political parties would organize three days of carnivals to which people would come from literally hundreds of miles around. In between the cookouts and music, the politicians would get up and speak. That was the only way they could draw a crowd. This was true all through the nineteenth century. The people had nothing else to do. They were bored out of their minds. No radio. Not even mass newspapers. Young men would court. Kids would play games. You could see old friends.

These festivals were the equivalent of sponsoring a TV program so people would watch your advertising. Part of what's happened now is that you don't drive down to the county seat and listen to a five-hour speech by a politician. There are better things to do. This is one reason speeches used to be a lot longer. People travel that long, they damn well don't want to be given a twenty-minute speech. Just the sheer multiplicity of other things you can do makes politics harder for people to get interested in. And a lot of today's politicians don't know how to talk to ordinary people. It's one of the reasons Ronald Reagan was so good at what he did. He spent years of his life, when he was working for General Electric, going to factories to give speeches and then having lunch in the cafeteria with the workers.

You wrote a book several years ago in which you said the press matters less than people think in presidential politics. Could you defend that as it applies to 1988?

I think 1988 is a classic example. All the fuss about the media – the TV ads and all – and they had almost no effect on the outcome. The argument about who Dukakis was had a big effect. But by Labor Day the electoral map was about where it ended up. The polls barely moved at all [between September and the election]. This was a year in which the incumbent party had a terrific argument for continuity based on objective data: employment, inflation, peace and prosperity.

And security issues. If people believe you neither care nor know much about protecting the national security and personal security, you're dead. I don't think the media did that. Michael Dukakis was a nuclear-freeze Democrat. You can argue whether that's a good or bad policy, but if the American people believe it's your policy, you will not get their votes for president. It is not a majority [viewpoint]. My point, though, is that this kind of political argument doesn't have a whole lot to do with how the daily campaign gets played out on the evening news.

How do you defend the controversial ABC News poll in October, where Dukakis was declared all but dead?

I don't defend the use of that poll. I think it was way overdone – devoting eleven minutes of our broadcast to a poll. It probably won't happen again. The early polls are really ridiculous. They're usually taken at a time when nobody's paying attention. To say, "If the election were held today, how would you vote?" – it's like saying, "If David Greenfield [his son] were playing baseball for the New York Yankees today, he would never get a hit." He's seven years old. That's one of the things that drives me nuts about polling.

What else should be done differently the next time in covering the campaign?

There has to be some effort to let people know more from the candidates. And at the same time, we have to subject the candidates very early to the thing that ABC correspondent James Wooten did after the debates – that is, to compare what they say to the truth. Somebody has to say, "Look, folks, when Michael Dukakis talks about the 'Massachusetts miracle,' about three-and-a-half-percent unemployment, [he doesn't point out that] New Hampshire has the same thing."

It's a legitimate role for the press. Because right now there's no sanction if you screw up your facts. If you talk to the Kennedy and Nixon people from 1960, they were worried about being intellectually coherent, about what people would say. Now the attitude is "Well, so we make a mistake. Fifty thousand will see it corrected in *The New York Times*, but 30 million heard the original charge on TV."

It would also be nice to cover a campaign in which you try to put what the candidates were saying next to what people's lives are really like. And maybe you ought to remind people of what the candidates were saying eight years ago, before they were running. I think there's a way to get the campaign on a more serious level, and by that I don't mean a more pompous level.

Was this campaign especially dirty on Bush's side?

In historical terms, no. And you could argue that Michael Dukakis's position on the Pledge of Allegiance was very dishonest. What he told us went on there wasn't true. You could argue that the issue had almost nothing to do with being president. But when I first heard about this thing, I thought it was a Jehovah's Witness case – that somebody was being made to say the pledge. In fact, the courts hadn't spoken at all about that. The court of appeals was saying that a teacher is allowed to lead a pledge. You can't make the teacher say it, but the responsibility of a teacher and of a student are very different. Anyway, the [Bush] point was that Dukakis's sense of patriotism was a bit more complicated than that of most Americans, and he was right about that. As for Boston Harbor, I thought that was a perfectly clean charge.

But how about the larger truth – that the Reagan-Bush administration had a lousy record on the environment and Democratic governors by and large have what you could call a proenvironment record? How do you avoid being manipulated by the Boston Harbor-style sound bites?

Almost every environmental group endorsed Duka-

JONATHAN ALTER *is a senior writer at 'Newsweek,' where he covers media and politics.*

On the other hand, every major environmental group was essentially liberal. Sure, the press can make these points. Certainly the day Bush went to the flag factory all three networks ran very, very critical pieces on Bush and patriotism. But the press shouldn't try to show it's not trapped by the sound bite by being really scornful, always adding that little twist at the end. The best solution for reporters is that as soon as they see what's going on on the campaign trail, abandon it. Just abandon it, and do your own piece. Start stocking up on what these candidates are saying in January and February, before they are so conscious of the sound-bite gig – and run that.

How about the character stories? Were they helpful to voters?

The fear after Gary Hart was that there would be a scarlet-letter approach to the candidates. But that died out, because we really had only one candidate in the race [Hart] who invited that kind of scrutiny. I'm less worried about the character issue because it's one of the only things television does well in politics. When you add in the mix of interviews and debates, certainly with respect to Dukakis, you get a very good sense of who he was. Everybody in Boston, friend or foe, told me early on that this is a guy incapable of admitting mistakes and a man of no warmth. And I think by the time he got finished, people knew that about Dukakis.

Don Hewitt, executive producer of '60 Minutes,' recently revealed who he voted for in recent elections. Would you?

No. If anybody could watch my coverage this year and figure out what my politics were, I'd be really shocked. And being an analyst is not like being a commentator. I take the distinction very seriously. What I like to do best is to show people more about how the process works. Take a speech and say what its themes are. Why did he use this approach? What's his greater goal? I'm not serving any function if I'm up there telling people what to think. I want to focus people's attention on what to me are the more important parts of politics. The very first *Nightline* I did during the campaign last fall attempted to show how much more Republican the country is now in terms of the Electoral College – how Kennedy would lose to Nixon today if he carried exactly the same vote. Now, whether I think that's a wonderful thing or a terrible thing – that's what happened. I do not think it is the job of a journalist to be on the air calling balls and strikes.

Given your background, though, isn't it fair to say that you are at least slightly to the left of the American electorate?

It would have been true at one time. But some of what passes for the left in this country – I can flatly say, "I am no more." What I feel about the left I can honestly say is just about equal to what I feel about the right. Look, I'm a Jeffersonian. I believe that after they hear a chunk from this guy and a chunk from the other guy, the people are smart enough to make a choice. It seems impossible for a lot of politically active people to believe that the voters have listened and deliberately chosen to go another way. There are plausible reasons why voters would have chosen Bush over Dukakis, or Dukakis over Bush. They are rational as opposed to irrational explanations. People aren't stupid just because they voted for a different candidate.

How about the argument that Reagan got off kind of easy with the press?

Well, Reagan was a much more likable guy than Carter. But there were other reasons. First, Reagan had an agenda. Second, he got shot and survived – a very important political event in recent American history. And third, he was able to drive a program through Congress. The press tends to be on the side of winners. It can smell blood in the water but also the other smell – the smell of power and confidence, and they tend to ride with it. The other thing is that where other presidents would have quivered and shaken, Reagan let the press criticism roll off his back. He was smart enough not to take the press seriously.

The example I like is, if you took a liberal in 1980 and said, "I'm not going to tell you who will win, but in eight years you are going to have zero inflation, five-percent unemployment, civil liberties essentially maintained, big deficits but the best relations with the Soviets in seventy years, would you take the deal?" Most liberal voters would have said yeah.

The problem that I have with the press corps is that it is stylistically tough and substantively weak. The guys who sit and yell and scream at the press secretary or president – "Aren't you drifting, Mr. President?" – and they think that's being tough. Being tough can mean acting like the most civil person in the world, then going back to find what's in the budget and rap the hell out of it.

Jesse Jackson. You have some doubts. . . .

Well, Jackson is much more glib than he is honest. In this way, I suppose, he is just another politician. But Jesse Jackson likes to pretend he's something different. In 1984, the big issue was the runoff primary in the South, because that was supposed to disenfranchise blacks. Big deal about that. This time, he said, "Well, I came in second, therefore I deserve the second spot on the ticket." Where in American history – outside of George Bush and one or two other examples – has that ever been true? Since when has that been a rule? Well, Jesse says it's a rule. The same thing happened to Dukakis that happened to Mondale. Jackson holds his breath. He turns blue. "I want a plane. I want this. I want this kind of respect from the committee." That sort of behavior . . .

> You can ask the average American whether he wants to be ripped off by Ivan Boesky or have his life taken by a kid with an Uzi – it's not the same level of concern.'

Going back twenty years, Jesse Jackson was very unusual, because he talked about what some people would think of as conservative values: Stay in school, no dope. He started out also being very antiabortion. Teenage responsibility was a big thing. One of the questions that I've always had is why Jesse Jackson doesn't talk during the campaign the way he talked during the off years.

And he has never addressed the public's fears about race directly. What if he said, "Look, we're not talking about Ralph Bunche or Sidney Poitier moving in next door. We're talking about the fear of crime. The criminals themselves are marauders – very much like the Klansmen and the terrorists in the South – and they are preventing people, most of them black, brown, old, poor, from living a decent life. The fact of the matter is that no one knows better than black Americans that this marauding class of young black people – it's a menace." That kind of talk would first of all have the virtue of being true. But it is also a way for someone like Jackson to run right at the central fear that is always associated with someone who is different. With Kennedy, it was the fear of Rome's influence.

Instead, Jackson says, "Why are we talking about crime in the streets – we should be talking about crime in the suites." From my view, you can ask the average American whether he wants to be ripped off by Frank Lorenzo or Ivan Boesky on the one hand or have his life taken by a kid with an Uzi – it's not the same level of concern.

Somehow some Democrats have come to think that if they are tough on crime, they must be soft on civil liberties. Some simply have no understanding of the issue. Growing up in Brookline [Dukakis's home town] doesn't help. The second thing is that they think it will be seen as antiblack. I remember in 1968, Bobby [Kennedy] was saying, "We can't tolerate summer after summer of disorder in the streets." And McCarthy kids [*Cont. on 180*]

Greenfield

[*Cont. from 107*] were saying, "Aha, Bobby's become a right-winger." Well, if you're really so afraid to have people think you're a right-winger, you translate that into thinking, "Well, therefore I don't want to come out with this visceral sense of what crime does to people."

Can we require more from TV stations in terms of giving free time to candidates?

I would have no problem with requiring that the price of a broadcast license be the requirement that they give free air time to qualified candidates. There are relatively simple mechanisms – petitions, for instance – to avoid fringe candidates. I am offended that taxpayer money is in essence channeled back to the networks and stations in the form of payment for commercials. You've got public financing of presidential campaigns and a huge percentage of the money they take in gets paid to the stations. Isn't there something a little odd about that?

What do you read?

I get paid to read. Maybe I designed it that way. I read six or seven newspapers a day, or at least look at them. *The Wall Street Journal* is for some reason the one I feel most eager not to miss, both because I like their news reports and public-policy coverage, and I love their editorial page, because it really pushes you. That section has pieces that are written from a very strongly held set of beliefs that often challenge a lot of conventional wisdom. Stuff you take for granted – like the deficit being a big problem – and suddenly they are telling you not to worry so much. You have to read *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, because they are the public-policy troughs of rumor and fact. Among periodicals, *The New Republic* I don't want to miss, and the *Washington Monthly* pushes you on things about how the government works or doesn't work. Of conservative publications, I read *The American Spectator* and *Commentary*, because I think they are the most intellectually alive. The *National Review* seems a little stuck. And *The Nation* I find almost useless as a magazine of the left, because it is just so utterly predictable and wearisomely trumpets clichés. I used to like *Mother Jones*, but I'm not too keen on the new *Mother Jones*. I read ROLLING STONE so I have something to talk about with my [high-school age] daughter and also because I'm interested both in music and the music-politics connection.

And I read books, whether it's late at night or getting up an hour early, because I think that's where the debate starts. Right now I'm plowing through William Manchester's biography of Churchill. I started to read the volume that just came out, then decided it was a little idiotic to start when Churchill was past midcentury, so I went back and bought volume one.

If someone said everything they knew came from ABC News, what would you tell them?

I'd say that's not enough. I'd ask what they were reading. The best thing television can do is tell you something about a subject you knew nothing about and stimulate your appetite to go out and learn more. I don't have any problem with using television to entertain or divert, because that's how I use it most of the time, too. If you put on a Yankees or Mets game on one channel and a superb documentary about third-world debt on another, the odds are very, very strong I'm watching the ball game. But at its best television can make you go out and not accept things on the surface as much as you did.

You've called the TV tabloid reporters "barbarians," but you seem annoyed at their critics, too.

I thought of the electronic barbarians in a more historical sense. These people were coming over from a strange land with strange customs. But my biggest problem is the notion that I've heard from a lot of news directors that Geraldo Rivera, Sally Jesse Raphael and Morton Downey are blurring the line between news and entertainment. I mean, that line has been trampled and erased for the last fifteen years or so by the news directors themselves. They have used the most blatant hype and salesmanship to sell local news. How many times during sweeps week have we seen stories like "Inside the Soaps"? How about "Killer Fish"? – supermarkets not selling fresh fish. That was my favorite this year. It sounded like *Jaws IV*. The lesson to be learned here is that when you start playing around with journalism, when you push the boundary too far, there are consequences. There are stations now actually dropping some of their news to make room for *Geraldo*.

Can television be a teacher?

Yes, provided you keep it in perspective. You can say, "This isn't the first time historically that a vice-president has faced the problem of how to step out of his own shadow. Here are some other examples." I think the potential to explain complicated information is definitely out there. One of the reasons people turn us off, in fact if not in their brain, is that we're lazy. We journalists ought to be able to reinvent the wheel enough to avoid using the same old stale rhetoric – "The Senate Ethics committee is expected to raise serious questions," blah, blah. You can do that off the top of your head. When I'm doing what I think is good work, I'm deliberately using the medium in a different way, saying stop, look, listen. Go back and try it differently.

You can't have a Khmer Rouge of journalists march into people's homes, tie them up in front of their TV sets and say, "You must learn." But what you can do, maybe, is to make broadcast journalism as compelling, as exciting, as clear and as humane as possible. ■